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SUBJECT: TUNNELING UNDER: LINKING EUROPE AND AFRICA ACROSS
THE STRAIT OF GIBRALTAR

REF: RABAT 1029

¶1. For decades, the governments of Morocco and Spain have been contemplating a way to connect Europe and Africa through a permanent land link across the Strait of Gibraltar. After a series of feasibility studies spanning more than a quarter century, a mixed Spanish-Moroccan commission determined that an undersea train tunnel similar to the France-England Channel would be the most practical option. Studies found that a suspension bridge would be four times as costly, could interfere with navigation in the strait, and would be harmful to migrating sea life.

¶2. The chosen route would link Paloma Point near Tarifa in Spain with the Moroccan Malabata Point, just east of Tangier, through a 37-km train tunnel. This route crosses the shallowest section of the strait, with a maximum depth of 300 meters. It is not feasible to run the tunnel between the two closest points of land - Cap Sires in Morocco and Punta Canales in Spain, a mere 14 km apart - because the ocean depth at that point reaches 900 meters.

¶3. The tunnel is expected to cost \$5 billion and will be financed by Spain, Morocco and the EU, with the possible eventual participation by private enterprises. The two countries intend to launch a tender in 2007 or 2008 and complete the works in 2020. Trains would transport passengers, vehicles, and cargo between the two terminals in 30 minutes. The annual traffic capacity of the tunnel will be 1.6 million cars, 500,000 trucks, five million vehicle passengers and 11 million rail passengers.

¶4. COMMENT: Given the high volume of illicit traffic in persons and narcotics flowing between Morocco and Spain, legitimate concerns exist regarding the wisdom of facilitating the flow by tunneling under the strait. Spanish diplomats in Rabat seem unconcerned, but other European diplomats have privately expressed their skepticism to Emboffs regarding the wisdom of creating such a link. Either way, completion of the project is a long way off, and circumstances are likely to change significantly in the meantime.

RILEY